Episode Book

EPISODE #5916

Grey Rocking Meets OPSEC: A Family Firewall

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SYNOPSIS

Grey rocking and information restriction are the two most-recommended tactics for people stuck with a toxic parent—yet the phrase traces back to a single 2012 blog post with no clinical research behind it. This episode asks whether the underlying problem was already solved elsewhere: in intelligence work and cybersecurity, where need-to-know, OPSEC, and firewall policy decide in advance what gets shared. The catch is that you can never say any of it out loud. We dig into the behavioral mechanism underneath grey rocking—reinforcement, extinction, and the extinction burst that makes week one worse than doing nothing—and why a half-hearted attempt can be more harmful than never starting. Then we follow the threat past the single conversation into data aggregation: how flying monkeys pool harmless fragments into a coherent case, and why deciding who to trust is the wrong question. Along the way: the real cognitive cost of expressive suppression, and why a policy written down in advance might work where willpower doesn't.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a term that traces back to a single blog post in twenty twelve. No clinical trial, no peer-reviewed study, nothing a psychologist would put their name to.



Herman

And it's probably the most widely recommended coping strategy for people stuck dealing with a toxic parent.



Corn

That's the setup. Daniel's been poking at this one for a while, and his question this time is whether we can give it a spine. We've talked about grey rocking before, and about information restriction, the two tactics the lay community hands people who can't just walk away from a family system. Daniel calls them hacks, and I think that's fair. His idea is that the intelligence world and cybersecurity already solved the underlying problem. Need-to-know. OPSEC. A firewall policy. You don't share what doesn't need sharing, and you decide that in advance.



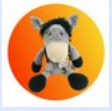
Herman

And the twist he's interested in is that you can't say any of that out loud. You're not going to tell your mother you're applying an information security posture to her.



Corn

No. You could, as an experiment in social trolling.



Herman

It would be a very short experiment.



Corn

So the question is whether those constructs work as an internal north star, something you never name, and whether writing your own need-to-know policy down could make grey rocking less nebulous.



Herman

Let's define the terms first, because grey rocking gets misused constantly. The common version people repeat is that you ignore the person.



Corn

Which it isn't.



Herman

It isn't. The precise version is that you make yourself as uninteresting as a grey rock. You respond in a neutral, minimal, emotionally flat way. You acknowledge, "I see", "OK", and you limit engagement. You're still in the room. You're just giving nothing back.



Corn

So it's not the silent treatment.



Herman

The silent treatment is a punishment. It's designed to be felt. Grey rocking is designed to be unfelt. The person should walk away from the conversation with nothing to work with and nothing to complain about, and those are different goals.



Corn

Information restriction is the sibling tactic.



Herman

The information diet. You stop sharing the details that reliably get used against you later. Not out of secrecy, out of self-protection. The framing I like is that you still see them, you just give them almost nothing to work with.



Corn

And why do we call them hacks?



Herman

Because that's what they are. They're lay-community methods, not clinical terms. The grey rock phrase traces to a mental health blog in twenty twelve. There's no direct scientific research evaluating whether it works. The support is anecdotal, and it's anecdotal from a lot of people, which is not nothing, but it isn't evidence in the sense a clinician would want.



Corn

You searched for the literature.



Herman

I did. There isn't any. A search for grey rocking and emotional abuse and coping strategy returns nothing. The closest thing that exists is general emotion-regulation research and behavioural reinforcement theory, which we'll get to, because that part is real, even if it was never tested on this specific application.



Corn

So the honest position is that two million people are running an untested method, and the theory underneath it is borrowed from a lab.



Herman

That's the position. And it's exactly why Daniel's question is interesting. If the thing works but nobody can explain why, maybe the frameworks that were built to explain a structurally similar problem can fill the gap.



Corn

So that's what they are. Now the why, and the why it so often fails.



Herman

The mechanism is reinforcement and extinction. Two of the most reliable findings in behavioural psychology. The toxic person gets something out of the interaction. Attention, a reaction, the satisfaction of watching you get upset. That payoff is the reinforcement, and it's what makes the behaviour repeat.



Corn

They're not doing it because they're evil. They're doing it because it works.



Herman

It works. Every time. That's the trap. The person has spent decades learning that pressing this button produces that result. And extinction is what happens when you take the payoff away. If the button stops working, the behaviour fades.



Corn

Over time.



Herman

Over time, and here's the part most of the advice skips, because it's the part that makes people quit. Extinction doesn't start with the behaviour fading. It starts with an extinction burst.



Corn

Say what that is.



Herman

It's an initial increase in intensity or frequency. The person presses the button harder, then presses it in a new way, then tries a different button entirely. They're looking for a route back to the reward they used to get. This is what the first week of grey rocking usually looks like. It's worse. Not a little worse. Meaningfully worse.



Corn

So the person tries it, gets a worse week than they had before, and concludes it doesn't work.



Herman

And they quit at the exact moment the method is doing its job. For extinction to work, the change has to be consistent and permanent. If you grey rock for four days and then break on the fifth and give them the fight they wanted, you've done something worse than never starting.



Corn

Why worse?



Herman

Intermittent reinforcement. If the behaviour is occasionally rewarded, it becomes more persistent, not less. A variable reward schedule is the most durable way to train any behaviour, in any animal, including this one. You've just taught them that persistence pays off sometimes. That's harder to undo than never having rewarded it at all.



Corn

So a half-hearted grey rock is not half as effective. It's worse than nothing.



Herman

It can be. That's the sharpest caveat in this entire topic, and it's the strongest argument for the thing Daniel's proposing. If consistency is the whole game, and the problem is that a person under emotional pressure is the least consistent version of themselves, then a policy decided in advance, when you're calm, is doing real work. You're not relying on willpower in the moment. You already decided.



Corn

There's a second cost hiding in here, which is that grey rocking is exhausting.



Herman

Expressive suppression. You're feeling the thing and deliberately not showing it, which is not the same as not feeling it. And it's one of the more cognitively expensive things a person can do. Habitual suppression measurably degrades memory and decision-making.



Corn

Which are the two faculties you most need while you're under pressure from someone who's trying to get a rise out of you.



Herman

So the hack taxes exactly the resources the situation demands. There's a case that grey rocking makes you worse at defending yourself in the moment, even as it starves the behaviour over months.



Corn

And a pre-decided policy is the fix for that too, in theory.



Herman

In theory. It moves the decision earlier, when you have capacity, so the in-the-moment cost is just execution, not judgment.



Corn

Let's talk about why the sharing instinct makes this so hard in the first place.



Herman

In a healthy relationship, sharing is the point. You give someone a piece of yourself and they hold it, and that exchange is how trust gets built. There's no version of closeness that doesn't run through disclosure.



Corn

And an abusive system inverts it.



Herman

Perfectly. The same behaviour, the same impulse, the same warm feeling while you're doing it. And then the morsel comes back at you. You told your mother you were struggling at work. Six weeks later, in front of the whole family, that's evidence you can't manage your life. You mentioned you'd looked at houses in another city. Now you're the one who was planning to abandon everyone and didn't have the decency to say so.



Corn

The disclosure is the ammunition. The instinct that makes you close to a normal person is the same instinct that arms the person who hurts you.



Herman

And that's why people describe the moment they realize it as a kind of betrayal that's hard to explain to anyone outside it. They weren't just hurt. They were used as the source of the weapon.



Corn

There's a name for the second-order version of this.



Herman

Flying monkeys. From the Wizard of Oz, which is exactly where the term comes from. The Wicked Witch rarely does her own pursuing. She sends the monkeys. In the family literature, a flying monkey is someone who knowingly or unknowingly acts on behalf of the abuser. They gather information, deliver manipulative messages, and damage your reputation through proxy harassment.



Herman

It is. Some of them know. A lot of them have been told a version of events that makes them the hero of the story for intervening. The aunt who calls to say your mother is heartbroken and you should really just call her. She believes she's helping. She is doing exactly what was needed.



Corn

And the abuser stays clean.



Herman

That's the design. The abuser orchestrates while maintaining plausible deniability. They never sent the flying monkey. They just mentioned, in passing, to the right person, how hurt they are. The message arrives through three mouths and no fingerprints.



Corn

The threat isn't one conversation, then. It's the aggregate.



Herman

This is the part I think people underrate. Any single morsel seems harmless. You told your cousin where you're working now. You told your aunt you're not coming to the wedding. One is nothing. But the flying monkeys pool notes. The cousin mentions the job. The aunt



Herman (continued)

mentions the wedding. Someone else mentions the address. And suddenly there's a coherent picture, and it's a picture that supports whatever story the abuser is telling. You're distant. You're hiding something. You moved and didn't tell anyone. Cut together, the fragments become a case.



Corn

Each piece was defensible. The composite isn't.



Herman

Which is the argument for protecting categories rather than case-by-case discretion. If you decide morsel by morsel, you'll lose, because each morsel looks fine in isolation. That's the whole trick.



Corn

And the parallel to intelligence work gets very direct here. The literature on this even has a name. Data aggregation. Combining information from multiple sources to produce something none of the individual sources revealed.



Herman

The classic case is unclassified fragments being pieced together into a classified picture. Each piece was cleared for release. The combination wasn't. The intelligence community treats that as one of its most persistent vulnerabilities, precisely because every individual decision looks correct.



Corn

There's an episode in the archive about Five Eyes intel sharing where we got into need-to-know as a structure rather than a virtue.



Herman

And the point that holds up is that need-to-know isn't about trust. It's about compartmentalization. You can trust someone completely and they still don't need a piece of information, because the risk isn't their character, it's the aggregation. What they'll do with it combined with everything else.



Corn

Which is a useful reframe for a family system, because the standard advice is to decide who you trust. This says the question is wrong.



Herman

The question is who needs this, and for what. And those two answers come apart all the time. Your aunt is trustworthy. She doesn't need to know your new address.



Corn

If the mechanism is reinforcement and extinction, and the threat is aggregation, what do you actually anchor the practice to?



Herman

The closest thing in the literature is a government document. The National Counterintelligence and Security Center's OPSEC briefing, and it's explicit that this was written for individuals and families, not just organizations. The line is that OPSEC principles and tactics protect not just organizations but also individuals, their families, and other loved ones.



Corn

That's a deliberate extension.



Herman

Deliberate. And the core tool is the Critical Information List. A list of your critical information. Capabilities, activities, limitations, intentions. And critically, it explicitly includes personal items. Personally identifiable information, health information, travel plans.



Corn

So the government's own version of this document says your medical history and your travel dates are critical information.



Herman

It says that. And then it goes further. There's a line in the briefing listing examples of unsecure situations where you should consult your critical information list. And one of the examples is public conversations, or even at home with family and friends.



Corn

They wrote down that family is a threat surface.



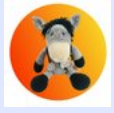
Herman

They wrote it down in a government document. Which is a striking thing to read if you've spent a decade trying to explain to people why you don't tell your mother things.



Corn

What else is in the cycle?



Herman

The OPSEC cycle is the policy engine. Identify critical information. Analyze the threat. Analyze vulnerabilities. Assess risk. Apply countermeasures. Assess effectiveness.



Corn

And that last step is where the pop-psychology version just stops.



Herman

It stops. Grey rock advice is a one-way instruction. Do this thing. Nobody tells you to come back in a month and check whether it's working, or whether the threat has changed, or whether the countermeasure now costs more than the leak it prevents. The OPSEC cycle has a review step as a structural element, not an afterthought.



Corn

Which matters because the answer changes. A relative who was a threat five years ago might be old and ill now. Or the opposite. The person you wrote the policy about isn't static.



Herman

They're not, and the policy shouldn't pretend otherwise. But here's where Daniel's firewall analogy earns its place by being wrong.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

A firewall is a static rule set. You write the rules and the packets hit them and that's it. But grey rocking isn't static. You don't grey rock your mother at a funeral the same way you grey rock her on a phone call. The context changes and the correct response changes with it. So the firewall isn't the right mental model. It's closer to a policy engine. Rules that evaluate against context.



Corn

Or a dimmer switch.



Herman

There's a framework in the lay literature that gets this right, and it's the most concrete thing I found. Three modes. Gray Rock, which turns you almost off. Medium Chill, which keeps a faint glow. Yellow Rock, which adds just enough warmth for the children watching.



Corn

That last one is doing something specific.



Herman

It's the acknowledgment that a child in the room changes the calculation. You don't want to teach a kid that adults go cold and blank with each other. So there's a mode where you're warm enough for the audience that matters and still giving the adult nothing of substance.



Corn

And there's a decision rule.



Herman

Children present, Yellow Rock. You need her cooperation on something practical, Medium Chill. She's fishing for drama or information, Gray Rock. That's a policy. That's a set of conditions and responses you could write down and apply without thinking about it in the moment.



Corn

What's in Medium Chill specifically?



Herman

Two components. The first is don't share any personal information. Tell them nothing, ask them nothing. And the second is a set of scripts. Ready-made non-answers. "I don't know, I'll have to get back to you." "We'll see." "It's already handled, taken care of." "The topic is closed."



Corn

The scripts are the piece that makes this feel implementable. You're not improvising.



Herman

You're not improvising, which is the whole point. And grey rocking has its own three named scripts. The Deflection. "Not much to report. Same old stuff." The Non Response. "I will have to think about that." And The Topic Killer. "I do not have anything to add to that."



Corn

Those are pre-written responses to predictable provocations.



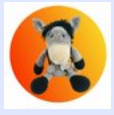
Herman

Pre-written because the predictable provocations are, in fact, predictable. Which tells you something. If you can list the scripts in advance, you can list the policy in advance.



Corn

And there's a success signal in the literature that I want to flag, because it reads almost perverse the first time.



Herman

The line is that she may complain that you are cold, distant, or different. And that complaint is evidence of success.



Corn

You have to be ready for the accusation to be the proof, not the problem.



Herman

Because what's being complained about is the absence of a payoff. If the person is noticing the change, the change is landing. Which doesn't make it pleasant. It just means the signal is the right one.



Corn

Here's the part of Daniel's question I don't think has an answer yet.



Herman

That there's no documented personal need-to-know policy for any of this.



Corn

We went looking. There's the OPSEC Critical Information List, which is a government construct. There's the information diet, which is informal. And there's the dimmer switch, which is a lay framework. But there's no standalone, published, personal need-to-know policy adapted for people in abusive family systems.



Herman

There isn't. The synthesis Daniel is proposing appears to be novel. Nobody's written this down as a named practice. Which is either an opportunity or a warning, and I don't know which.



Corn

Which brings up the one thing that has to be said here.



Herman

The safety caveat, and it's not boilerplate. In relationships involving ongoing or escalating abuse, where the expected increase in intensity could put you at risk of harm, prioritising safety and clear boundaries and external support is the right call, not grey rocking alone.



Corn

Because the extinction burst is theoretical until it's your front door.



Herman

If the person's response to losing the payoff is to escalate to something physical, or to escalate through the children, the whole calculus changes. Grey rocking is a tool for situations where the contact is unavoidable and the threat is bounded. Where the threat isn't bounded, it's not the right tool.



Corn

So the answer to Daniel's question is partly yes and partly not yet.



Herman

It's a real anchor, and the dimmer switch is the bit that makes it concrete. The OPSEC cycle gives you a review step the lay advice doesn't have. The Critical Information List gives you the category-level thinking instead of morsel-by-morsel. But the documented personal policy is something you'd be inventing, not adopting.



Corn

And the whole thing has to run silently.



Herman

Silently. You never cite it. You never explain the posture. You just decline to share the address, warmly enough that nobody thinks you've built a system, and you don't have to tell anyone that you have.



Hilbert

My uncle had one. A laminated card in his wallet. Four categories on it in ballpoint pen.



Herman

What were the categories?



Hilbert

Where he slept, who he owed money to, what he was about to do, and who in the family was lying. He said the fourth one was the only one that stayed accurate.



Corn

That's a fair summary of most family trees.



Hilbert

I've been running a version of this myself for years. Not for family. For the neighbour.



Herman

Which neighbour?



Hilbert

The one with the boundary hedge. Four feet over on my side, two feet on his. I've been logging every conversation. Notebook, colour-coded index, tabs at the back.



Corn

How many conversations are we talking about?



Hilbert

Two hundred and six. Well. Two hundred and nine. I count a conversation as anything over ninety seconds. Under ninety seconds it's an incident, and incidents go in the front.



Herman

There's a tabbed section for countermeasures.



Hilbert

And another for assess effectiveness. That's the one that actually works. Everything else is just keeping the record. You don't find out whether your policy is any good until you go back and read it.



Corn

How's it reading?



Hilbert

The neighbour's been dead two years.



Herman

He's been dead two years and you're still logging?



Hilbert

You don't let a policy lapse because the threat actor stopped being a threat actor. That's how they come back.



Corn

The threat actor being dead does rather limit the comeback.



Hilbert

I've added a flying monkeys tab. One entry so far.



Corn

Who's on it?



Hilbert

The widow. She's been acting suspiciously at the parish council meetings. I'm not saying more than that. I've got a page on it.



Corn

Two years of a dead man and a parish newsletter.



Hilbert

You can laugh, Corn. I'll note it in the log.



Corn

Well, one thing your log does prove is that the assess-effectiveness step is the one that nobody else bothers with.



Hilbert

That's the part I've been listening for. I hadn't thought about it as the piece that makes the rest of it a policy. I'd just been doing it because the notebook had a tab.



Corn

There's a real question underneath all of this.



Herman

Whether the thing even works when you write it down.



Corn

If the synthesis is novel, what does a documented personal need-to-know policy actually look like? The document. Does it help, or does it just become another artefact you have to hide, which is its own kind of leak.



Herman

And there's a cost the frameworks hide. The drive to share is human and healthy, and it's how people stay well. Any policy that suppresses it is spending something. The question is whether the cost of the policy is lower than the cost of the leak, and that's going to be different for every person who tries it.



Corn

The government writes its critical information list for a threat that's outside the door. The version Daniel's describing gets kept from the people inside it. That gap is all of it.



Herman

That's where we'll leave it. Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop. If you want more of this, try episode thirty-five, The Privacy Gap; episode sixteen, On Deepfakes, SynthID, And AI Watermarking; and episode twenty-three eighty-two, How Five Eyes Intel Sharing Really Works. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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